

The Antwerp canvassing programme

The political economy of the five senses in urban development.

Introduction: Imagine the unimaginable

Urban development for the people. Urban development with the people. Many decision-makers on urban development and many urban planners share this dream. Especially for those who work to regenerate deprived neighbourhoods this is even more than a dream. It is a necessity, at least if the goal of the decision-makers and the planners is to improve the quality of life of the persons living and working in those neighbourhoods.

Urban development for the people. Urban development with the people. It is easily said, less easily done. Sharing good practices is the only option to proceed on this difficult road. Over the last seven years we have developed the approach of the 'canvassing program' to involve people in urban development. ¹We think it is a good practice, and we are proud to share it with you.

The problem we faced when we started to think about the canvassing programme was the complexity and the duration of an urban development process. In this particular case the city decided to create a park in a derelict railroad yard. Great news for the people living in that particular neighbourhood. But how to convey the good news to these people if the only thing you can say is 'if everything runs smoothly, we will have a park in eight years from now; in the meantime there's a lot of paper work to do, we have to raise a lot of money, and then we will cause you a lot of inconvenience when we start working on the park. But you must believe us, dear citizen, we will really create this park for you'? And if you want to take it one step further, and you not only want to bring the good news to the people, but also to give them the opportunity to share their ideas about the park, is it not like asking the people to imagine the unimaginable?

Thinking? Why not just take action?

This was our aim when we devised the canvassing program: to make people imagine the unimaginable. A good way to start up a thinking process is simply to take action. That is the idea behind the canvassing program: to do things, especially enjoyable things. The canvassing programme creates opportunities for people to 'do' things in those spaces that are crucial for the urban development programme. In this way people will experience these spaces in a very intuitive way. As such this experience is a very good starting point to create images of that space. And the people who are not interested in engaging in the imagination process will at least have had a great time.

Doing enjoyable things in unexpected spaces... after seven years of practice this seems to be a very appropriate working definition of the canvassing program. Look for those (unexpected) spaces in the project area, think about the enjoyable things that can happen there, and just get on with it, take action. Can I be more specific about 'enjoyable things'? No, simply think about anything that provides enjoyment and start to build an activity. Below I will share some of examples from our experiences in Antwerp.

Making history enjoyable

The first example I would like to share with you is how we work with the 'history' of places. Is 'history' something enjoyable? Most people would tend to answer 'no' if it means learning dates and names of kings and generals by heart. But they will most certainly answer 'yes' if it means inviting people to 'dig' up their old pictures, or if it means that someone is interested in listening to their memories. 'Yes' if people start to understand how their 'little history' fits into a 'bigger history', told by university professors. And 'yes' if people see 'their' (little and bigger) history presented in a beautiful book or exhibition.

In the case of one neighbourhood we created a beautifully designed 'history book'. We also set up a week-long celebration on the occasion of the book presentation. The people who lived in that 'forgotten' neighbourhood were proud to see the book presented in a major bookshop in the city. (And we enjoyed the fact that this 'expensive' project was 'break even' at the end of the day because the book sold well...).

In another neighbourhood, near Central Station, we focused more on 'visual history'. Again people were asked to 'dig up' their old pictures. This time we chose to organize a charming exhibition in a small candy store that was closed down a few years ago. The shopkeeper had left her shop due to a sudden illness, and it still looked the same as it had been designed in the sixties. We literally set up the exhibition in the shop's interior. Over a period of a few months the public was able to visit this little place of peace and quiet in one of the busiest squares of the city, with the sounds of the construction for the new square in the background.

From the library to the neighbourhood

A second example that I would like to share is that of the neighbourhood of the new public library. The Antwerp town council decided to build this new library in one of the more 'difficult' neighbourhoods of the city. The idea was to implant a 'normal' function attracting 'normal' people to a space that had been abandoned for decades to 'marginal' functions and 'marginal' people. The idea of an attractive public library was certainly a good one, as it brings a constant flow of people, young and not so young. It also offers possibilities of 'emancipatory' work with the 'marginal' people in the neighbourhood. But it is not sufficient to restore 'normal' life to a neighbourhood. So we launched the idea of a book market once a month, only a few months before the opening of the public library. And once the library opened, we made sure that brochures were available to encourage the visitors of the library to visit the surrounding neighbourhood at the same time. In one brochure we presented all the food ingredients that one can buy in this multi-ethnic neighbourhood. And in a second brochure we took the process one step further and we gave the shopkeepers the opportunity to add a coupon to attract new customers.

There are of course many more examples; I have actually had to 'dig' in my own memory to remember all the nice moments ... The 'sing-in' in the newly-renovated train station... The 'unexpected' art created by the students of the art academy for the derelict railroad yard (has anyone seen zebras along Antwerp's railroads yet?)... The documentary we made about life in the different squares in a neighbourhood... The time that we were playing golf and knitting in the derelict railroad yard...

Guidelines for a canvassing program

Doing enjoyable things in unexpected spaces was our working definition for the canvassing program. Are there other guidelines that can be extracted from the above examples to put together a 'good' canvassing program? Should we only organize enjoyable activities or should we be somewhat more selective?

Relation with space

The most difficult guideline perhaps is the fact that there must be some kind of 'relation' between the activity and the space used. It is very easy to organize another nice festival wherever there is enough space left to park some trucks with all the expensive material that you need to organize a festival these days. But that means there is no relation between the festival and the space itself... I enjoy going to festivals if I like the music played by the band, but I don't consider a festival to be a candidate for a canvassing program. But apart from the general guideline that there must be a relation between the activity and the space, I am unable to provide more details about how that relation must be established. It can be as straightforward as setting up a market in a square that is suited for markets. Or it can be as unexpected as playing the 'elite sport' of golf in a derelict railroad yard.

A word of caution for events organizers and city marketers

I have a word of caution for all 'events organizers' though. Most 'events organizers' I know consider the 'public' as 'consumers'. A good activity for a canvassing programme means that at least part of the 'public' is considered as 'producers' of the activity. The activity must be 'enjoyable', but it is also meant to be the start of an imagination process. To merely 'consume' an activity is less effective than giving the people the opportunity to 'produce' something. Along the same lines, we would like to repeat our 'caveat' to city marketers. 'Normal' city marketing 'sells' a 'strong image' of the city to 'consumers'. It is a 'strong image' designed by marketers. A canvassing programme creates opportunities for people to produce and explore their own images.

Think variety

After seven years of experience I have yet to encounter a single activity that all people experienced as enjoyable. 'Young' people will like something, the 'not so young' people won't (although we have had some good experiences with 'intergenerational activities'). 'Culture-minded people' will like certain activities, while 'sporty' people won't, and vice versa. So, if you want to involve a variety of people you have to think about a variety of activities. That is why we speak of a canvassing program. It is not the one-shot spectacular activity that counts. The idea is to assemble a series of activities that appeal to the variety of people you want to involve. And who knows, maybe some of the 'culture-minded' people will begin to like the 'sports activities' too...

Don't rush things

Another reason why we refer to a canvassing programme is that imagination takes time. So we have to give people all the time they need to fuel their imagination. Of course, decisions must be made, and so people don't really have 'all the time' to create their images. But let us face the facts: decision-making is an incremental process; not all decisions in a complex process are made at the same time and not all 'decisions' stand during the process. Thus, one should let the decision-makers think about their most complex issues from different angles, and in the meantime give people the opportunity to experience the space from different angles too. And in one way or another these two 'flows' will finally come together.

Public imagination

When we refer to imagination, this is not a private activity. During the programme awareness must grow that different people have different imaginations. Creating urban space however is a collective process, so somehow these private images must all 'add up' or 'collapse' in a kind of shared image. So it helps greatly if the activities of a canvassing programme ensure the opportunity of exchange between people. Again, a canvassing programme is 'intuitive' in its approach, so the exchanges can be very intuitive too. And the mere fact that something 'unexpected' happens in an 'unexpected location/space' can start the rumours.

Don't be shy about money

At last, the money guideline. A canvassing programme costs money. Lobbying in favour of 'intuitive activities' doesn't equate a plea in favour of 'cheap' activities. And even if the activities are not that expensive, their promotion is as expensive as the promotion of a festival. So, make sure to calculate that it will amount to a small percentage of the total budget for the development programme. This can consist in part of a reorientation of existing budgets. Most cities have a budget for 'events' and for 'city marketing'. These budgets are mainly spent in the (historic) city center. So it can be part of a wider policy to use part of these budgets in more peripheral areas of the city, and in doing so rethink the way that these budgets are spent (from 'consumer' logic to 'producer' logic).

The canvassing programme and the 'traditional' approach to citizen involvement.

We categorized the canvassing programme as an approach to organize the involvement of citizens in urban development. It is not the first approach to citizen involvement, and by no means does it make the more 'traditional approaches' superfluous. Nevertheless it is a specific approach. By comparing the canvassing programme with the more traditional approaches, we come closer to its specificity.

The first difference: Focus on the relation

Traditional approaches focus on the participation of citizens in the decision-making process. They emphasize that urban development and planning must be a democratic process. The people living in the affected neighbourhoods are stakeholders in this decision-making process, so by way of hearings, focus groups, surveys and the like these people must be given the opportunity to raise their voice. These traditional approaches focus on the relation between the (political) decision-makers, the (professional) planners and the 'citizens'.

The canvassing programme has another focus: the relation between the 'citizens' and the urban space that they are living in. As such it invests in the development of this relation by creating opportunities to 'experience' space and to create images of space. I already mentioned it: a canvassing programme does not come for free; the decision-makers must allocate some budget to it. Of course there must be good reason to allocate this budget. This means that there must be some kind of 'problem' to be solved, in our case the relation between people and the space that they are living in must be problematic. Or at least, there must be a 'belief' that investing in the relation between people and their space as part of an urban development programme will lead to better results. I will review this issue again below.

A second difference: Intellectual versus intuitive

Maybe the promoters of 'traditional' forms of citizen involvement are not aware of it, but their approach is very 'intellectual'. To be able to participate in these traditional forms means you must be aware of your 'interest' in the development, you must be aware of the 'interests' of other stakeholders (and of the games that they are playing) and you must be able to speak the right words at the right time to have influence. Personally I think most people have these capabilities, but they are not trained to use them. (Formal education even focused for a long time on training us NOT to use these capabilities...)

Usually the more traditional forms of citizen involvement are a 'battle with uneven weapons'. We all know the traditional setting of a hearing: in front there is a table with some of the decision-makers and some of the planners, and then you have the interested people. The decision-makers and the planners use their words and their sketches, three-dimensional projections and the like, and then the citizens may raise their hand to ask a question. If the meeting is well-organized there will be a mobile microphone, so that the other people present can at least hear the question.

Most of the time however these meetings will end in mutual frustration. The people in front 'only heard complaints, no constructive ideas... do the people of the neighbourhood really not understand the opportunities that we are creating for them?'. And those citizens who decided to attend the meeting instead of being a coach potato, 'are more than ever convinced that the important decisions have already been taken, and are unsure if those intellectuals up front even tried to understand their concerns.'

Of course, the promoters of the 'traditional approach' have since fine-tuned their methods, and have learnt to reduce frustration (hosting a drink after a meeting as one of the more popular approaches to deal with frustration...) But the main fact remains: the interested citizens must enter the world of the decision-makers and planners and must use the intellectual weapons the 'people in front' are more trained to use.

A canvassing programme is by no means 'counter-intellectual'. But it restores the relation between the 'use of the five senses' and the intellect. If the canvassing programme really consists of a variety of activities, it will literally appeal to the five senses. I think 'smell' is the

only sense that have not used explicitly until now. Enjoying a good experience by 'using their five senses' gives people confidence. And if they see their images of space grounded in their experience of using that space, they will tend to promote their ideas more confidently. And in general, when using our 'five senses', we are much more 'equal' than when we use our intellect that can be (de)trained in one way or another.

Similarity: Empowerment it is

I mentioned some differences between the 'canvassing programme' approach to citizen involvement and the more 'traditional approaches'. It is just as important to stress the similarities between them. The most important similarity is the aim to 'empower the people'. The promoters of the traditional approaches aim high: they plead in favour of the democratization of urban development, and they are right to do so. But maybe the canvassing programme emphasized another aspect of 'empowerment'. By creating opportunities to use urban space in a variety of ways, the canvassing programme will stimulate a sensation of freedom. A kind of freedom that is traditionally linked to the city and to the idea of urbanity. It is the idea of 'do as you like'. And it is the 'belief' of the canvassing programme that if more people start 'to do as they like' in urban space, more people will start 'to speak as they think' in the decision-making process. Of course the way the activities in the context of a canvassing programme are chosen is crucial: hence our plea to choose 'producer' activities instead of 'consumer' activities for a canvassing programme.

The canvassing programme as part of the urban planning process

Sketches of social space

We all know that urban space is really 'physical' space and 'social' space at the same time. We all know that one of the challenges of urban planning is to strike a balance between these two aspects of urban space. But a general flaw of 'traditional' urban planning is its 'implicit' belief in physical determinism. In brief, physical determinism is the belief that if you create the 'ideal' physical space, the 'ideal' social space will follow. (Or that creating a 'good' physical space is sufficient to cure a 'bad' social space). Many urban planners in the audience will now raise their voice and say 'No, no... that is not what we believe, we do not believe it anymore at least, our predecessors believed this...'. I am not an urban planner, but I am happy to look in from the outside at how you work. And believe you me, you are thinking in terms of 'physical space'. In your beautiful scale models the people are the last thing you add, rather like Playmobil puppets. And secretly you believe that people will start to act like these puppets once they understand what a beautiful urban space you have created for them.

In that sense, I think that a canvassing programme can be part of an urban planning and design process, and not simply the 'enjoyable' fringe programme to entertain the people while the specialists are at work. Most urban planners take design classes and learn to make sketches to grasp some basic ideas. Actors and dancers also tend to use sketches when they are creating a production. They start moving in the space that will later become the stage. And they try different pieces of dialogue in different settings and different intonations. Or even in different 'genres' (What happens if we play this very dramatic dialogue as if this were a sitcom?) If the activities of a canvassing programme are chosen wisely, they will function somewhat like 'sketches from life' of the possible use of the space. People are acting out what could happen if... maybe in the way actors and dancers do. So, a canvassing programme can introduce the concept of 'social space' early on in the design process, and if wisely used, it can really work as a tool for planners and designers. Of course this is an invitation to urban planners and decision-makers alike to participate in the activities of the canvassing programme.

Re-inventing public space

Particularly for one key issue of actual urban development the canvassing programme can be used in this way. I mentioned above that a canvassing programme focuses on the relation between people and urban space and I suggested that one of the reasons for doing so is that this relation is problematic. One problematic issue I see (at least in Western cities I know) is the relation between people and 'public space'. Gradually, public space became 'vacant space' in a lot of Western cities. It was defined in a negative sense as 'not home'. And certainly in Belgium we invested a lot in our (privately-owned) homes. But we forgot to think about the qualities of public space. And the empty space became 'insecure space'... We blame 'King Car' all too easily for this deterioration. I think a deeper mental process of shifting borders between the 'private' and the 'public' is at play here. Giving new meaning to 'public' space is of strategic importance for the future of our cities.

For me the word 'public' is crucial when discussing this issue. It is a social quality of urban space. So once again, we are discussing the 'balance' between physical and social space. As we consider 'public' to be a social quality, it is obvious that merely investing in the architectural qualities of public space is insufficient. We have to re-explore the social meaning of the word. And again, if the activities of a canvassing programme are wisely chosen, it can serve as a kind of 'action research' into the meaning of 'public' space. What kind of activities 'work' in public space? What kind of activities make people begin to communicate? Where are the limits of 'doing as you like' in public space? To what extent is it possible to have 'one' public space for 'all'? Where can we do this and in what cases is a more segregated approach – giving young people 'their' space and the elderly 'their space' - a better solution?

Conclusion: towards a new political economy of urban development

I started this paper with a working definition of the canvassing programme as we use it in Antwerp: 'Doing enjoyable things in unexpected spaces'. Gradually I added more severe criteria to define what a 'good' canvassing programme means. A canvassing programme is aimed at empowering people by giving them opportunities to use the spaces where they live with their five senses, to create intuitive images of that space. It is not a 'promotion campaign' to be used instead of 'boring' traditional approaches to citizen involvement in urban development. And if the activities of the canvassing programme are chosen wisely, the canvassing programme can be part of the urban planning process, and introduce the notion of 'social space' during an early phase of the development.

The canvassing programme is very much about 'intuition'. And we ourselves started working with the canvassing programme in a very intuitive way. To conclude this paper I would like to share an intuition that I have developed after seven years of working with the canvassing programme. In this paper the canvassing programme is considered as part of a more extensive programme of urban development. In its traditional meaning 'urban development' signifies 'construction works with a major impact on the built-up environment of a city'. Maybe, we need to tweak this meaning. Maybe 'urban development' needs to be just as much about 'urbanity as a way of life'. It was Louis Wirth, who first described the city as a way of life. But we neglected to invest our full human potential in order to explore this way of life.

If urban development is about the development of a 'way of life', then it is a process that started a few thousand years ago and that accelerated over the last couple of centuries. Urbanity as a way of life is about 'using' the city. And in that way the canvassing programme is a very small part of the development of a 'culture of using the city'. When people use the city, they create value. The value of meeting people. The value of new experience. The value of some diversion after a hard day's work. Using a concept of forgotten political economy we can refer to it as 'value in use'. It is value linked to the unique, almost inexchangeable 'effort' of people to create. Classical political economy related 'value in use' to the amount of labour needed to create a certain product. Here, we use the concept in a looser relation to 'labour'

in the strictest sense. We link it to the results of the efforts of people to project their life in space, using their five senses and their intellect.

We all know 'urban development' is about that other 'value' concept of political economy. 'Exchange value', the value a certain good has when it is exchanged in the 'market'. 'Consulting the market players' is a common activity in an urban development process. And public decision-makers are aware of the fact that they 'need' the market players in their development. Modern public authorities sometimes even want to be a 'market player' and 'make money' from urban development. There's nothing wrong with that. As long as the decision-makers do not forget that at the end of the day the city isn't about 'exchange value'. It is about 'value in use' for all the people 'using' the city in their daily activities. In doing so, the joint effort of all these people daily re-creates the city's unique 'value in use'. If the canvassing programme can be a small reminder of this unique 'value in use' of a city, then it will have reached its goal.

¹ 'Canvassing programme' is a translation of the Dutch concept 'Wervend Programma'. This is the concept that we used while thinking about our approach. 'Werf' as a noun means construction site, and our programme is linked to some big construction sites in Antwerp. 'Werven' as a verb means 'to canvass', to promote an idea by bringing it to the people. Over the years we have stated time and again that we are not using the correct expression, but we simply couldn't come up with a better one. And maybe 'canvassing program' is not a particularly good translation of a not particularly appropriate expression, but we couldn't find a better one.